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ABSTRACT

A technique for teaching writing in academic English as a second language (ESL) to students bound for college-level courses focuses on one essential reading and writing skill: using multiple sources as input for writing. The program is designed for any level and consists of a series of readings and a number of questions, the answers to which become successive paragraphs or sections in a final paper. The procedure for developing such a unit includes: selection of a topic of interest to the class; location of three sources of appropriate difficulty from among ESL reading texts; narrowing the topic to one that can be covered through use of the sources; deciding on the procedure to be followed in organizing the topic (what questions can or should be answered and in what order); reviewing the resources to assure that at least two contain information relevant to each question; distributing the questions to the students in sequential order; giving each student access to all sources; having the students take notes from the sources; having students write a first draft essay answer to each question, using only their notes; and having students put the pieces together to form a whole essay from the revised and edited sections. (MSE)

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ONE IS NOT ENOUGH: WRITING FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES

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The primary goal of any teacher in an English for academic purposes (EAP) program should be to become unnecessary -- that is, to help students reach the point where they can function independently in university classes. It seems fairly clear that in order to reach this goal, teachers should give their students as much practice as possible doing tasks that are similar to the ones they will eventually face as regular university students.

This is easier said than done. Two problems immediately present themselves: First of all, even though almost all EAP teachers have spent time as university students themselves, their individual experiences are limited, and few can claim to really know just what reading and writing tasks their students will face in their academic careers; and second, even if we can agree on some useful tasks, it is sometimes difficult to imagine bridging the gap between the skill level of lower level students and the skill requirements of real university work.

This paper will outline one possible solution to these problems. The unit to be described concentrates on one essential academic reading/writing skill -- using multiple sources as input for writing. It is controlled enough and flexible enough so that even lower level students can benefit from it; in fact, it was designed for students at the lowest level of an intensive English program.

In general, the unit consists of a series of readings and a

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number of questions, the answers to which become successive paragraphs or sections in the final paper. A step-by-step procedure for creating such a unit follows.

1. Select a topic of interest to your class, a topic of interest to you, and/or a topic based on available sources.

2. Locate at least three sources of appropriate difficulty from among ESL reading texts, encyclopediae (including children's encyclopediae), other reference books (for pictures, charts, graphs, etc.), and/or source books. Although some teachers complain about the fact that certain topics are constantly "recycled" in ESL reading texts -- pollution, the family, early man, and so on -- this can be turned to advantage if a number of these sources form the basis for one writing unit.

3. Decide on a narrowed topic: What can be covered using these sources? Teachers should not feel at all guilty about doing this "for" their students, since this is the normal pattern in university writing assignments, i.e., a topic or list of topics is usually provided, along with rather detailed information about content requirements and restrictions (Horowitz 1986).

4. Decide on the organization: What questions can/should be answered in order to cover the topic? What order should they be answered in? This is the heart of the "control" in this unit. While it is true that in many (though certainly not all) cases students must discover the issues inherent in a topic as they read their sources and that this process is a complicated, recursive one involving a great deal of "back and forth" thinking between issues and sources, this element is left out of this unit in the interest of concentrating on

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other things, particularly the gathering of information from multiple sources to address those issues. It seems to me that asking a student with little academic writing experience to do everything at once is asking too much. In addition, once students have completed a unit with this degree of control, teachers might want to lessen the amount of control in future units, having students work together as a class or in small groups to decide on the issues which can be covered using the given sources. And of course, teachers will eventually want to have students find and evaluate their own sources. These more difficult tasks, however, are best left until after the students have had some experience extracting relevant information from multiple sources. For many writers, this is a daunting task in itself.

5. Review the sources to make sure that at least two of them contain information that is relevant to each question.

6. Give the students the questions (on a handout, on the blackboard, etc.) in the order they should be answered in. The questions should be numbered and plenty of room left under each one for students' notes. As mentioned above, in providing the questions, the teacher is providing not only topic focus but also discourse organization because the questions are sequenced in such a way that the answers, laid end-to-end as it were, cover the topic in a coherent way.

7. Give each student access to all sources by providing personal copies, class sets of texts, and/or sources to be passed around.

8. Have students take notes from the sources, writing relevant information under each question on the question list. Work through one source as a class to make sure that students understand the task.

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Then, have students work individually or in pairs through the rest of the sources, one at a time. After all the sources have been gone through, teachers may want to allow students to compare their notes, either in pairs, small groups, or as a class.

9. Have students write an essay answer to each question using only their notes (not the sources themselves). These first drafts can be passed around for group reading, criticism, and suggestions for revision.

10. When the first drafts have been revised, corrected, rewritten, etc., students are ready to "put it all together." The answers to the questions (without the questions themselves) form sequential sections of the final paper. At this point, editing the longer paper for coherence, consistency, needless repetition, etc., will be necessary.

I have purposely given only a brief description of the last two steps because the personal style of each teacher will dictate how problems of revision and editing are handled.

I have used this unit successfully at several skill levels by varying the difficulty of the readings and spending more time at lower levels helping students understand the readings. The unit is done in a workshop atmosphere, with students working at their own pace. This gives the teacher many opportunities for individual conferences.

I now have a file of five of these units, and other teachers in the institute are creating more each semester. I believe that these units constitute an important resource in helping our students gain the skills they need to deal with real academic tasks. .

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REFERENCE

Horowitz, Daniel. 1986. What professors actually require: Academic tasks for the ESL classroom. TESOL QUARTERLY.20(3). In press.